

From *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*,

Volume I (New York, 1997), Richard G. Hovannian, editor.

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ARMENIAN LITERARY CULTURE THROUGH THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

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If by "literature" we understand the writing and scholarship of Armenians expressed in the Armenian language, then this development occurred quite late in the history of the Armenian nation. The political and social individuality of Armenia and the Armenians goes back to the days of the Old Persian Empire, but their literature was a product of Christian times, which went hand in hand with the cultural revolution wrought by the conversion of Armenia. In fact, the development of Armenian literature was both the result of an established Christian presence and at the same time a major factor in the final conversion of the populace at large to the new faith.

But to concentrate only on literature written in the Armenian language obscures two points. Long before the fifth century of the Christian era, Armenians had been familiar with classical culture. Latin and Greek sources inform us about the influence of Greek literature and thought, notably in court circles. In the first century B.C. King Artavazd, son of the more famous Tigran, gained a reputation as a writer of plays and histories. Inscriptions were set up in Armenia, and coins minted. Armenians became known in the universities of the Greek-speaking world as teachers and scholars. But all this literary activity was con-

ducted in languages other than Armenian. The language of cultural aspiration was Greek—as it was for many peoples who bordered on the Eastern Roman Empire. On the other hand, Aramaic, the international lingua franca of the Iranian world, was used for official inscriptions; and Syriac was known in church circles.

The second point is that the Armenians possessed a rich heritage of oral tales and stories dealing with the gods, heroes, and noteworthy figures—real or imaginary—of the past. These tales were recited by bards (*gusan*) and accompanied on the lyre or other instrument. Such musical entertainments were popular in princely circles long after the collapse of independent kingdoms. Indeed, the tradition of wandering minstrels survived until modern times. But in pre-Christian Armenia the *gusans* did not put their songs into writing. Singers of tales, like dancing girls, were frowned upon by the clergy, who dominated Armenian written literature, and also by the compiler of the first secular law code in the twelfth century. So apart from a few fragments preserved by historians or antiquarian scholars, nothing survives of a long prewritten culture that reflected the real interests and enthusiasms of early Armenia. The written literature that developed with remarkable rapidity in the fifth century was the perquisite of a small group that deliberately set itself apart from pagan traditions. The books of classical and medieval times do not therefore give us a full picture of Armenian cultural life.

Invention of the Armenian Script

One of the most noteworthy features of Armenian literature is that it has a very precise beginning. Armenians, who were familiar with the pagan and early Christian literatures of the world around them, could only transpose that familiarity into their own tongue when a script for Armenian was invented. That momentous step was due to the efforts of Mashtots, also called Mesrop by writers after his own time, and was accomplished around the year A.D. 400.

Most of our knowledge of these events comes from a short biography of Mashtots written by one of his pupils, Koriun, after the master's death (Koriun, 1964). Although it is rather short on precise details and rather long on rhetorical description, this *Life of Mashtots* is important both as a historical source and as the first example of biographical writing in Armenian. Koriun says little about the early life of Mashtots. He was born in the province of Taron in western Armenia and received

an education in Greek literature. We are not told where; but many of Mashtots's contemporaries went to the schools of Antioch and other centers of Greek learning. He entered the royal chancellery and advanced to an important position. However, he had a vocation for the religious life; abandoning the secular world, he became an ascetic hermit. After some time he began to attract disciples, and embarked on the career that would transform Armenia.

Mashtots's efforts were directed to preaching the gospel in remoter parts of the country. Although King Trdat (Tiridates in Greek) had been converted to Christianity at the beginning of the century, and St. Gregory the Illuminator had established the first organized Armenian bishoprics—the main episcopal see being at Ashtishat in Taron, Mashtots's native province—the whole country was by no means converted overnight. The pious exaggerations of Agathangelos (1976), whose *History* describes these events, are misleading. Another early historian, Pavstos (P'awstos) Buzand, describes in some detail the struggle of the church in fourth-century Armenia; there was much opposition from the old noble families with their pagan traditions and basically Iranian-oriented outlook (P'awstos Buzand, 1989). And from Koriun we learn that many areas were still entirely untouched by the Christian message. Mashtots set to work to eradicate "ancestral habits and the diabolical worship of demons."

It was in the course of his missionary activity that Mashtots realized the potential value of having the appropriate religious texts written in the Armenian language. Although the educated clergy used Greek or Syriac for the liturgy and could read biblical and theological books in those languages, that was of little help to the mass of the Armenian people. In concert with Catholicos (supreme patriarch) Sahak, Mashtots turned his attention to the development of a native script so that Armenians could have the requisite Christian books in their own language. The original impetus, therefore, in the development of Armenian written culture came from church authorities. And ecclesiastical concerns remained predominant in the literature of later generations.

There are some minor discrepancies in the accounts of Koriun and of other early writers concerning the precise details of the invention of the Armenian script. However, it is clear that Mashtots was the driving force, that the patriarch Sahak lent his full support and was later active as a translator himself, and that the king Vramshapuh was directly involved. Koriun says that the king, when informed of Mashtots's zeal,

told him about a Syrian bishop Daniel who had put together a script for Armenian. That a Syrian should have taken the initiative is a good indication of the importance of Syrian missionary work in southern Armenia. The influence of Syriac vocabulary on Armenian ecclesiastical usage, and of Syrian writers on developing Armenian literature, also point to the strong ties that existed between these two Christian lands.

Naturally enough Daniel's alphabet was based on a Semitic script. The latter, as used for Hebrew and Syriac, had twenty-two letters, which rendered the consonants, but the vowels were not clearly indicated. The structure of the Semitic languages does not make this too grave a disadvantage. But Daniel's system—no trace of which has survived—was inadequate to cope with the richer consonantal structure of Armenian; nor could it render vowels, whose patterns in an Indo-European tongue are less predictable than in Semitic. So that attempt came to naught, and Mashtots went himself to Syria "in the fifth year of Vramshapuh," according to Koriun (1964). But since the beginning of Vramshapuh's reign has been variously dated, from 389 to 401, the precise date is uncertain.

Particularly important was Mashtots's visit to Edessa, for this was the center of Syriac-speaking Christianity on the Roman side of the border with Iran. He had taken a group of young pupils with him. These he divided into two groups and set to learning Syriac and Greek. Mashtots himself with his closest associates went on to Samosata on the Euphrates. There, in concert with a scribe competent in Greek literature, he worked out a script for Armenian that rendered all the nuances. This time it was based on a Greek model, with a separate sign for each vowel as well as for each consonant. The only exception was the vowel /u/; in this case Mashtots retained the diphthong of the Greek *ou*. The script invented by Mashtots has remained in use down to the present day; modern uppercase letters have hardly changed from the form given them more than 1,500 years ago, while the lowercase letters are based on medieval scribal hands. There is, however, one interesting anomaly. The most common vowel in Armenian is the short /ɛ/ [ɛ]. But this is practically never written except at the beginning of words. So one finds in *written* Armenian clusters of consonants, perhaps as many as five or six, which in *pronunciation* must be grouped into appropriate syllables containing the vowel /ɛ/. It is difficult not to suppose that here the influence of Syriac was at work, for even when vowel signs were later introduced, the short /ɛ/ was not rendered.

The First Translations

Once the script had been fashioned, Mashtots immediately set to work to translate texts into Armenian. The first such effort was a rendering of the Proverbs of Solomon. Armenians enjoyed fables, proverbs, and pithy sayings; many such texts of a secular nature were translated in later centuries, and in medieval literature the genre of the fable was popular. But Mashtots was concerned with books appropriate for the church and its missionary efforts, so he began with a biblical text. Koriun adds the personal comment that he himself used that first translated text when teaching writing to pupils.

The patriarch Sahak and Mashtots now directed a massive effort to render into Armenian as much Christian literature as possible in as short a time as possible. Groups of young men were gathered—since this was an ecclesiastical operation, we must suppose that these were the “seminarians” of the time. First they were instructed in the script, then they were sent abroad to the main centers of Christian culture in order to learn Greek or Syriac, or both. Koriun gives us some details. He mentions the names of several pupils in the entourage of Mashtots and indicates that some were sent to Edessa to learn Syriac, others to Melitene, or as far as Constantinople, to learn Greek. But he does not name precisely the texts that were translated. Only in vague terms does he refer to the Armenians now having in their own tongue “Moses who taught the law, with the prophets, Paul and the band of the apostles, and the gospel of Christ” (Koriun, 1964).

Most of Mashtots’s own energies were devoted to missionary activity in the provinces to the east and north. But he did make one extended visit to the Armenians on the Roman side of the border, proceeding as far as Constantinople. There he greeted the emperor Theodosius II (408-440) and the patriarch Atticus (405-425) and received official permission (*sacra*) to carry on his educational work among Armenians in the eastern provinces of the empire. At this point Koriun refers to Mashtots collecting “many books of the church fathers” (1964). After 431 some of his pupils brought back from Constantinople other texts, including copies of the canons of the ecumenical councils held at Nicaea (325) and Ephesus (431). This new influx of texts prompted the patriarch Sahak to revise some of the earlier translations of “ecclesiastical books” and also to translate numerous commentaries on the scriptures. Koriun adds that Mashtots began himself to compose homilies with material taken from the prophets

and gospels in order to wake people up to the truth of the Christian message. Though several collections of homilies survive from the early period, none of them can be securely identified as Mashtots's own work. But if he put into writing examples of his lifelong preaching, he was the first original writer in Armenian.

Before turning to the question of original compositions by the pupils of Mashtots—men such as Koriun or Eznik, who were the real founders of Armenian literature—we should first cast an eye over the translated material. The texts with which the first generation of native Armenian writers were most familiar, since they had had a hand in rendering them from Greek or Syriac, were naturally of great influence on their own outlook and literary methods.

It must not be imagined that theology in a narrow sense was the sole concern of Mashtots's pupils. The Bible formed the staple of reading and study, while those in church circles would naturally be familiar with the liturgy and cycles of readings from the church fathers. The homiletic works of John Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianzenus, Severian of Gabala, Eusebius of Emesa, Evagrius, or of the Syrians Afrahat and Ephrem figured prominently, as did the biblical commentaries of Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria. These provided a solid basis for instruction and a wide range of parallels, imagery, and interpretation that were assimilated by Armenian writers. The *Catecheses* of Cyril of Jerusalem formed a basis for exposition of the faith—such as the *Teaching of Saint Gregory*, which forms part of the story of Armenia's conversion as described by Agathangelos. Numerous lives of saints and martyrs provided models for the descriptions of persecutions in Armenia that were only too frequent. The lives and sayings of the Egyptian Fathers, popular throughout the Christian world, were a source of enjoyment and gave a pattern for the idiosyncrasies of Armenian holy men and hermits. On a more sophisticated level the *Hexaemeron* by Basil of Caesarea (translated from the Syriac version) gave scholars information about the physical world and natural phenomena. It is curious, however, that Koriun and other writers describe the importance of Edessa and Constantinople but never refer to Jerusalem. Yet the liturgical practice of the holy city had great influence on the early Armenian Church; the Jerusalem *Lectionary* was among the first works translated into Armenian, and numerous Armenians went as pilgrims to the holy sites.

Special emphasis must be given to two works by Eusebius of Caesarea. His *Ecclesiastical History*, also translated from a Syriac version, not only provided a fund of historical information, widely

quoted and adapted by Armenian writers, but offered a model for the writing of history in a Christian context—that is, a model for the description of the working of God's providence in the present world. Several Armenian historians, though not all, regarded the writing of history as a demonstration of the ultimate triumph of piety and truth over the forces of evil and death. Even more elaborate was Eusebius's *Chronicle*. This was an attempt to correlate the history of the world as known from Greek and other sources with the Bible. It was the main source for later Armenian knowledge of the empires of the ancient world; but equally important, it showed how the histories of the various nations meshed with each other. Beginning with Movses Khorenatsi (Moses of Khoren), Armenian historians relied on Eusebius's *Chronicle* not merely for information about the non-Armenian world but as a schema in which the history of Armenia had its rightful place. It thus became possible to set the ancient oral traditions about the origins of the Armenian people into the patterns of world history and to demonstrate the antiquity of Armenia as a distinct and individual nation.

The First Original Writers: Koriun and Eznik

The amazing efflorescence of written literature in Armenian following the invention of the script can be explained by a combination of two factors. In the first place, Armenians—or at least, those of the elite in both church and state—had long been familiar with the culture of late antiquity. Many, such as Mashtots himself, had received a good classical education; while the regular clergy were versed in Christian texts of various kinds written in Greek or Syriac. Second, the highest authorities in the land, the king and patriarch, gave their backing to an intensive effort to make this accumulated wisdom available in the Armenian language. There was, therefore, no long gap of several generations while a newly acquired learning filtered through to a newly educated group. On the contrary, the first translators were already men of learning; their horizons were widened by the long periods of study they had spent abroad; and they were writing for a small but sophisticated audience now able to read and write in Armenian as well as foreign tongues. Those first pupils of Mashtots composed original works, drawing on the traditions with which they were familiar—some now rendered into Armenian, but some still available only in Greek or Syriac. As time went on, Armenian writers naturally

had an ever-expanding body of literature in Armenian on which to draw, as more and more texts were translated and as original works began to set specifically Armenian patterns.

Armenian literature deals with Armenian themes, and over the years it developed its own traditions in matters of style, imagery, and form. But the earliest compositions do not differ in any startling way from the type of work that was being produced in the fourth or fifth century outside Armenia. So when Koriun composed a biography of his master Mashtots, he already had in his mind some idea of how a biography should be arranged. It is not surprising that there are parallels between Koriun's biography and the *Life of Basil of Caesarea* by Gregory Nazianzenus. And in its turn that Greek *Life* was part of a long-standing literary tradition that had elaborated certain rules and procedures. These were written down in textbooks of rhetoric, some of which were later translated into Armenian. But anyone who had studied at a regular school or university would have been familiar with the standard practice. The particular importance of the biography of Mashtots by Koriun is that these old traditions, more recently shaped by Christian influences, were now applied for the first time to an Armenian subject. Being the first, it set a pattern. So when Agathangelos set about writing the life of St. Gregory the Illuminator, for his description of the travels of Gregory as a Christian missionary he naturally took his model from Koriun.

Much more complex was the work of Koriun's contemporary, Eznik. Another student of Mashtots's, Eznik had traveled to Edessa and Constantinople in order to learn Syriac and Greek, and had brought back texts. Koriun gives us a few details of these journeys but says nothing of Eznik's later career.

Although numerous homilies are attributed, rightly or wrongly, to Eznik, his fame in modern times depends on an elaborate treatise dealing with the problem of the origin of evil. Eznik expounded his theme by attacking four groups who had the wrong understanding of God as responsible for evil, and who did not interpret correctly the Christian doctrine of man's free will. These four groups were: the ancient pagan Greeks; the Persians—more precisely, the worshippers of Zurvan as the supreme god; the Greek philosophers; and the heretical sect of Marcion. Eznik refutes one by one their false interpretations and demonstrates that there is no created thing which is evil by nature. Evil results from man's perversion of the free will given him by God. Because of the method of argument, the work is often

known as the "Refutation of Sects." But that title does not bring out Eznik's prime concern. One should bear in mind that the most important of his many sources was the Christian philosopher Methodius's (d. 311) "On the Freedom of the Will," which attacked dualism and determinism as found in the gnostic system of Valentinus.

Ironically, however, Eznik's treatise—which has received attention from modern scholars for its information about Zurvanism—did not have much influence on Armenian writers after his own time. The themes of paganism, Marcionite heresy, or Persian mythology were too closely related to the generation of Eznik and the times before him to be adaptable to the needs of later centuries. By then paganism was irrelevant; gnostic theories had been more or less forgotten, though not entirely because the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus still circulated in Armenia; and the Persian Zurvanites had gone the way of all flesh. Eznik's work was not so relevant to the burning concerns that vexed Armenia after the sixth century: to defend Christian Armenian traditions against the claims of the church of the Byzantine Empire and against the temptations of conversion to Islam for social and economic advantage. In matters of style too, Eznik's work was untypical of Armenian writing. It is exact, sparse, extremely particular in its analysis and progression. But most Armenian authors were wordy, fond of elaborate imagery; and especially with some of the *Histories* one sometimes has the feeling that they would sound to best advantage if declaimed. Of course, most Armenians of the time could not read and were therefore read to.

Koriun and Eznik cannot be left without two further comments, which are of relevance to many other Armenian literary productions. The earliest surviving manuscript with the full text of the *Life of Mashtots*—as opposed to fragments or quotations—was written in 1672. And not only is there a gap of over a thousand years in the textual transmission, giving plenty of time for scribal errors, confusions, or misunderstandings to corrupt the text; by the tenth century an abbreviated version of the book was in circulation, which incorporated traditions from sources later than Koriun himself. Other texts too, such as the *History of Ghazar Parpetsi* (P'arpec'i) (Lazar of Parp), were reedited long after they were composed (1991). So a good deal of Armenian literature has not come down to us in the precise form in which it was originally written.

The transmission of Eznik's treatise illustrates the second point. Only one manuscript is known. This was written in the thirteenth century,

but the work remained unknown to the world at large until it was printed in Smyrna in 1762. Other works also have survived in only one manuscript, such as the *History* of Tovma Artsruni, which was not published until 1852. So the survival of the classics of Armenian literature was precarious. Indeed, if one remembers the many physical disasters that have befallen Armenia over the centuries—the destruction caused by invasions, burning, and looting, or the ravages of earthquakes—it is surprising that so much did survive. A few texts are known to be lost, such as the *History* by Shapuh Bagratuni of the ninth century (Thomson, 1988-1989); and some have survived in incomplete versions, such as the *Histories* of Ukhtanes and of Mekhitar of Ani. In some cases there is doubt whether a surviving text has been correctly identified when no title is found in the manuscript, such as the *History of Heraclius* attributed to Sebeos. But by good fortune we do seem to have most of the important authors.

The Early Historians

The most creative originality of the Armenians—at least in early and medieval times—lies in their art, more particularly their building and painting. As regards their literary culture, Armenians were more cautious in breaking new ground. This may be partly explained, perhaps, by the determined effort of the first sponsors of Armenian writing to eradicate the non-Christian past. Although songs about the ancient pagan heroes did circulate by word of mouth, sung by bards (*gusan*) at the courts of princes and on social occasions, such as weddings, these were not incorporated into the creative energy of ecclesiastical writers and scholars. The circle around Mashtots and their immediate successors were more concerned with assimilating the Christian culture of the world around them, rendering this—with appropriate adaptations—into Armenian, and using known prose forms to express their reaction to the specifically Armenian problems of the time. Eznik's originality in this sense is clear. But more typical of later Armenian interests, and more formative for later times, was the work of the historians.

Sahak and Mashtots had been more than “sponsors” of literary activity. They had created it, participated in it, and trained their pupils. But they were sponsors in the sense that they dictated the subjects of study and the texts to be translated. A different kind of sponsorship or patronage played a role in the writing of history. The interests of the great noble families required official spokesmen. Their endemic rivalry

played out in the political and social spheres had its echo in the war of words and propaganda. Not all of the Armenian histories were written at the behest of a prince whose ancestry needed flattering or whose present preeminence needed justification in terms of the past. But most historians had a case to argue; and despite rhetorical disclaimers of objectivity, few were entirely dispassionate. Tendentiousness, however, does not detract from liveliness. The classic Armenian histories not only have many a good tale to relate; they make frequent use of letters and speeches that break up the narrative, attract the reader's attention, and subtly expound the writer's own interpretations.

The first Armenian historians are extremely shadowy figures. Agathangelos, the "good messenger," who describes the conversion of Armenia to Christianity; Pavstos Buzand, who chronicles the conflict of church and state in the fourth century; Eghishe, who describes the revolt of 450-451 against the Persian shah; Movses Khorenatsi, who gives the first comprehensive history of Armenia from its origins down to the time of Mashtots—who were they? Later traditions provide elaborate details. But we have no reliable information from their contemporaries; and their claims to have been eyewitnesses of the events they describe cannot necessarily be taken at face value. In any event, there was no writing in Armenian before Mashtots; and no compositions by Armenians in Greek or Syriac are attested. So the works of Agathangelos and Pavstos are not later translations into Armenian of books written earlier, as was once thought, but works written in the fifth century. They may well be based on remembered tradition, but they reflect the outlook of a date later than the period described.

Agathangelos

Of all works in Armenian literature the work of Agathangelos has the most complicated textual history. It is not surprising that the life of St. Gregory the Illuminator and the dramatic conversion of King Trdat (Tiridates) should have been of interest to Christians generally, and therefore known outside Armenia. But no other work of Armenian origin was translated in whole or in part into so many different languages, including Greek, Arabic, Syriac, Georgian, Latin, and Ethiopic. What is more, there were two different recensions of the *History*, so there are different Greek and Arabic versions; and since the state of the story was in flux, the Syriac version included events of later dates not found in the Armenian. We need not investigate here this very complicated picture.

But it is worth noting that the first version of Agathangelos has disappeared in Armenian. The text as known from Armenian manuscripts and as quoted by Armenian writers is that of a second recension, for which a date of the late fifth century is not implausible.

This *History*, which gives the received and accepted story of the conversion of Armenia, is a patchwork of several different sources. It begins with a rhetorical preface, in which Agathangelos likens the writing of history to a voyage over the billowing sea and introduces himself as a "Roman, not unskilled in literary composition," who was commissioned to write the book by King Trdat himself. He then sketches the political history of Armenia following the Sasanian revolution in A.D. 224, the Persian occupation of the country, and the eventual recovery of the throne by Trdat. He describes the tortures inflicted on Gregory—who is no less than the son of the man who murdered Trdat's father—the martyrdoms of nuns who had fled to Armenia from Rome, the divine punishments that befell the court, and the emergence of Gregory from the pit in order to cure the demon-possessed king, when everyone had assumed that he had died fifteen years previously. At this point Agathangelos introduces a sixty-day sermon, the *Teaching of Saint Gregory*, which is based on the standard instruction before baptism as found in such works as the *Catecheses* by Cyril of Jerusalem. The third section of Agathangelos's *History* describes the destruction of pagan temples, the consecration of Gregory in Caesarea in Cappadocia as the first bishop of Armenia, the building of churches, and the organization of a regular clergy. The *History* ends before Gregory's death, though later versions of the story discuss in some detail his final days and the later discovery of his relics.

As a literary composition, the *History* of Agathangelos is a fascinating mixture of fact and fiction, in which historical events of a hundred years are telescoped into a lifetime. The emphasis on the importance of Echmiadzin betrays the viewpoint of a fifth-century writer; for until the late fourth century the Armenian patriarchal see was at Ashtishat, an old pagan cult-site in western Armenia. But if the historian uses the book at his peril, for the literary critic it is a mine of information, since it demonstrates the wide learning of an author typical of his time. "Agathangelos," if one can so name the several authors who had a hand in this progressively more elaborate composition, was thoroughly conversant with the Bible; he drew on a wide range of hagiographical sources for his descriptions of tortures and martyrdoms, and on an impressive reading in the works of the church

fathers for the *Teaching*. The *History* is not very cohesive, the last part being especially disjointed and evincing the influence of Koriun for the description of Gregory's missionary journeys. But by bringing together so many literary sources to bear on a topic that was Armenian, Agathangelos was blazing a trail. In comparison with Eghishe, for example, he is naive. But he tells his story with panache and must be reckoned as the first of a small group of writers who formed the Armenian literary tradition and set an indelible print on the way in which later generations viewed their Christian origins.

Pavstos Buzand

"Agathangelos," the good messenger, or bearer of good news, was certainly an appropriate pseudonym for the unknown redactors of earlier tradition concerning the conversion of Armenia. But the name borne by Pavstos Buzand has been misinterpreted. Writing about A.D. 500, the historian Ghazar Parpetsi assumed that it was the same as "*Biwzandatsi*" and meant "from Byzantium." Being a cleric of opinionated views, Ghazar upbraided his predecessor for writing a book unworthy of a man educated in that metropolis of learning. But *u* and *iw* are not interchangeable in Armenian. The clue to "Buzand" lies in the title given to the collection of books that included the four books of the historian Pavstos. This title, *Buzandaran*, means a collection of epic tales. Books three to six constitute the work of Pavstos. While the identity of the first two books is unclear, the context makes it plausible to see in them the Armenian version of the *Acts of Thaddaeus*—the story of the apostle Addai of the apostolic age and the first redaction of the life of St. Gregory the Illuminator.

In the nineteenth century the work of Pavstos appealed to popular writers because of its apparent emphasis on secular events: the precarious position of the Armenian kingdom between the Roman and Sasanian empires, the intricate politics of kings and princes who aimed at escaping the control of those powers on either side; the rivalries and deceipts of the great noble families; the elaborate descriptions of battles, hunting scenes, and worldly concerns. It is certainly true that Pavstos gives a stirring picture of the life, social and political, of the fifty-year period from the death of King Trdat to the partition of Armenia into Roman and Iranian spheres circa 387. The ways in which Armenians of the time thought and behaved come out clearly.

Yet Pavstos was not a secular writer. He does not approve of those traditional, pre-Christian mores. He is horrified at the persistence of

pagan ways, at the adoption of Zoroastrianism for political advantage, at the cruelty and immorality of many of the characters, especially royal ones, that he vividly portrays. Pavstos's heroes are the great Patriarch Nerses and the humbler holy men of the desert. Nerses strove to bring a Christian outlook to the court and was a staunch advocate of orthodoxy, opposing the Arian tendencies that influenced several Roman emperors of the time. On a more modest level, the hermits and saints in the wilderness strove to eradicate the paganism of the people. Of these ascetics and missionaries, the most noteworthy example was Mashtots, not yet mentioned in Pavstos. The *History* of Pavstos thus reminds us that the conversion of Armenia was a long, slow process, not accomplished in Gregory's time as Agathangelos would have us believe.

Pavstos has blended three major strands of oral tradition into his written account. The "Epic Tales" reflect the secular strands of royal history, covering the reigns of Trdat's successors down to the division of the kingdom and the deeds of the leading noble family, the house of the Mamikonians, in which the office of commander in chief was hereditary. Into those two main themes, which themselves contain numerous interpolations as they progress, Pavstos has integrated the ecclesiastical history of Gregory's successors as patriarch, with attendant digressions. Numerous repetitions and doublets indicate that Pavstos has not fully integrated his sources. But as a witness to the cultural life of a nation at a time of transition, these "Epic Tales," the *Buzandaran Patmutiunk*, are incomparable.

In particular, Pavstos emphasizes the legitimacy of family descent. In the secular realm, the Arsacids forfeited their claim through immoral conduct; in the ecclesiastical realm too, Gregory's successors often proved unworthy of their ancestor. But this theme of family legitimacy kept a firm hold on the Armenian tradition. Over a thousand years later historians and poets would still hope for the restoration of Armenian freedoms under the aegis of direct descendants of Trdat and of Gregory.

Eghishe and Ghazar

But despite the value of Pavstos Buzand as an historical source, his *History* did not have nearly as great an influence on Armenians through the ages as the work of Eghishe (Elishe, 1982). The *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* gave epic status to the leaders, lay and cleric, of the revolt against the Sasanian shah in 450-51. Curiously enough, we have two Armenian versions of these events, which are

not mentioned by outside sources: that by Ghazar Parpetsi and that by Eghishe. Ghazar's *History* (Lazar P'arp'etc'i, 1991), written circa A.D. 500, is primarily devoted to the career of his patron, Vardan Mamikonian, the nephew of Vardan. But about a third of the book describes the rebellion prompted by the suppression of traditional Armenian liberties during the reign of Yazdagerd II, the final defeat of the Armenians on the battlefield at Avarayr in 451, the martyrdom of the leading clerics in Persia, and the final release from captivity of the Armenian nobles who had survived the war.

The main themes of the story are common to both Ghazar and Eghishe. It is not the difference in details that has given the latter's version its preeminence as a literary document, but rather his interpretation of the specific events in more general terms so that later generations could adapt them to their own times and altered circumstances. Eghishe interprets the war of 450-51 as a struggle between vice and virtue in which the Armenians are fighting for their ancestral customs. Death in that cause is more honorable than life with ignominy; the true patriot is the defender of Armenian Christianity against Zoroastrianism; apostasy not only leads to personal damnation, it brings about the ruin of the nation.

Eghishe's *History* is a tightly knit book in which his basic themes—the covenant of loyalty to church and country, and the valor of the virtuous as contrasted with the cowardice and baseness of those who abandoned that covenant—continually reappear. Through the effective use of speeches, letters, prayers, and exhortations, he elucidates the motives of his characters, Persian as well as Armenian, and the underlying aims that explain their actions. Herein lies the uniqueness of Eghishe, for no other Armenian historian clarifies so well the forces that affect men's actions. Eghishe's task as a writer is not just to describe the past, to leave a memorial of glorious deeds for the emulation of succeeding generations. It is his duty to point out the evil that men have done, so that his readers will not lust after the false glory of this world but devote themselves to truth and godliness. Impiety is not merely a personal failing, it has abiding consequences for the nation as well.

Eghishe, like most early Armenian writers, drew on a wide range of literary sources. Given his theme and approach, it is not surprising that biblical and hagiographical allusions abound. He is also indebted to the works that circulated under the name of "Hermes Trismegistus"; and he is the first Armenian to use the Jewish philosopher Philo, relying on Armenian versions of several of the latter's works for elaborate similes.

But one source had a particular influence, not merely providing him with picturesque vocabulary but with a general philosophy or outlook. That source is the books of Maccabees. Agathangelos had already used those texts in describing Armenian paganism; Pavstos borrowed various passages for his battle scenes and was the first to make an explicit comparison between the Armenians killed in war and the Maccabees. But Eghishe more than any other Armenian historian makes the theme of the Maccabees, who fought and died for religious freedom, applicable to the Armenians. The Persians take the place of the Seleucids, Shah Yazdagerd is depicted in the same terms as King Antiochus, while the idea of death for ancestral traditions is modeled, at least verbally, on a basic theme of the books of Maccabees. This parallel between the history of the Armenians and the Jews is made by other Armenian historians. Some of them tried to find physical links between the two peoples by means of fictitious genealogies. In fact, the Armenian nobles had no Jewish blood in their veins. But Armenian writers were able to draw on powerful symbols of constancy to an ideal both religious and national that struck a responsive chord in their readers' hearts.

Ghazar has no reference to Eghishe, whose *History of Vardan* may well be viewed as a later rewriting of this dramatic period. Ghazar begins his *History* by describing it as the "third" history of Armenia, following the books of Agathangelos and of Pavstos. He depicts the last years of the royal Arsacid dynasty, the struggle for religious freedom against Sasanian oppression, the setback after Avarayr in 451, and the final success thirty years later when Vardan Mamikonian was recognized as governor (*marzpan*) of Armenia by the shah in 485. Ghazar's approach to the writing of history is less episodic than that of Pavstos; he does not break the flow of the narrative to introduce stories not directly relevant to his main theme. And like other Armenian historians he uses speeches and letters to enhance the literary effect of his work. His book is also the first to contain a vision of the distant future, as opposed to a divine revelation for immediate purposes. This particular episode of Sahak's vision of the restoration of the Arsacid monarchy and of the patriarchate in the line of Gregory after 350 years is no doubt the addition of a later interpolator. But the theme of wishful predictions in the context of lamentation at present woes came to have a long history in Armenian literature.

Another significant feature of Ghazar's *History* is the role of his patron. Agathangelos claims to have been commissioned by King Trdat (who died over a century before the *History* was written), and Eghishe addresses an otherwise unknown David Mamikon. But Vahan

Mamikonian is a well attested historical figure of Ghazar's own time, whose appointment as *marzpan* forms the climax of Ghazar's book. Appended to the *History* is a letter addressed to Vahan. Ghazar had been attached to the monastery of the patriarchate at Echmiadzin, but was expelled because of slander. He defends himself, giving a brief account of his early life. After studying in Constantinople, he was brought up in the household of the Kamsarakan family. There followed two years of ascetic prayer in the wilderness, after which he was attached to the court of the Mamikonian family. He had thus known Vahan since the latter was young, and it was Vahan who had secured for him the position at Echmiadzin. So Ghazar had a friend to whom he could turn in adversity. Even if his defense is self-serving, it does provide a rare glimpse of social life at a more personal level than the grand themes of his *History*.

Movses Khorenatsi

A fifth writer belongs to the group of early classic historians—"classic" in the sense that their histories not only became models to be emulated, but also gave a view of the Armenian past that was adopted as the received, standard interpretation. The *History of Armenia* by Movses Khorenatsi (Moses of Khoren) is the most comprehensive work in early Armenian historiography, but also the most controversial. Movses claims to have been a pupil of Mashtots's, and he ends his work with a long lament on the evil days that befell Armenia following the deaths of Mashtots and of the patriarch Sahak and the abolition of the Arsacid monarchy (which had occurred earlier, in 428). On the other hand, there are indications in the book itself that it was written after the fifth century. Not only does Movses use sources not available in Armenian at that time, he refers to persons and places attested only in the sixth or seventh centuries. Furthermore, he alters many of his Armenian sources in a tendentious manner in order to extol his patrons, the Bagratuni family, who gained preeminence in the eighth century. But despite the fact that Movses Khorenatsi is not known or quoted by sources before the tenth century, he became revered in tradition as the "father of history, *patmahayr*," and elaborate legends about his life, his other writings, and his association with Mashtots's other pupils gained credence after the year 1000.

The prime significance of Movses's *History of Armenia* is that as a literary composition, it was the most complex and sophisticated yet produced, and of all such works it had the greatest influence on later

generations. Movses Khorenatsi is the first Armenian historian to discuss in detail the purpose and methods of historical writing. In elaborate rhetorical terms Agathangelos had referred to the great story he was about to tell; and Eghishe had spoken about the moral duty of a historian. But Movses is clear and dispassionate. For him the writing of history is not the exposition of divine providence or the preaching of right conduct. Rather, its basic purpose is to bequeath to posterity a reliable record of the deeds of great men—not only heroic and martial exploits, but also notable acts of good governance and accomplishments of learning and piety. There is no place for obscure men or unseemly deeds. Not that Movses refrains from describing moral turpitude when that is relevant, but such behavior is not the model that historians should hand down. The historian has other responsibilities: veracity, reliability, and chronological accuracy. These are assured when the historian compares his sources with each other, takes into consideration the oral tales passed down by the bards, and rationalizes tales that have a symbolic rather than literal meaning.

These explicit considerations point to several important features of Movses's social world. In the first place, his patrons belonged to the great noble house of the Bagratid dynasty, whose landed interests dominated the economic and political life of the time. The great deeds referred to by Movses are those that bring credit to members of such an aristocracy, martial valor and wise acts being the most prominent. Then the importance of such noble houses is enhanced by a glorious ancestry. Hence Movses's emphasis on genealogies, for the virtues of the fathers shed luster on their sons. In the second place, Movses has borrowed from the rhetoricians of classical antiquity for his themes of reliability, conciseness, and chronology. This is one aspect of Movses's use and adaptation of a wide range of Greek sources, secular and ecclesiastical, to Armenian material.

Furthermore, Movses refers to rationalizing or interpreting the old oral culture of Armenia; he thus recognizes its importance and its popular hold. But as a writer in Christian times, he cannot accept it. Living earlier, Pavstos had railed against pagan customs. Movses can afford a calmer attitude because paganism was no longer a positive threat. He deliberately quotes several snatches from oral tales still sung in remoter parts, and refers to Iranian fables that his readers would have recognized. So he gives us a glimpse of the bard of traditional Armenian society, but his Christian orientation prevents him from re-creating that vital aspect of past times.

The scope of Movses's *History* is greater than that of his predecessors in another more obvious way. Using the *Chronicle* of Eusebius as a pattern, he starts with the beginning of the world as described in the book of Genesis. Since all mankind descends from Noah, Movses elaborately sets forth the genealogies of Ham, Sem, and Japheth. Traditions in Greek literature already existed concerning the origin of the various nations. The Armenians supposedly descended from Japheth through Torgom. The Armenians themselves had a heroic ancestor Hayk—in whom they saw their own name for themselves, *Hayk*, the plural of *Hay*. This eponymous ancestor had settled in Armenia at the time of the giants. Movses makes Hayk the son of Torgom, and so Hayk's descendants can be set out in a column parallel to the lines from Sem to Abraham, and from Ham to the Assyrian monarchs. In accordance with his passion for chronology, Movses can now expound in order the legendary antiquity of Armenia, its attested role between Parthia and the Greco-Roman world after Alexander the Great, and the more recent history of Christian Armenia. These form the main themes of the three books of Movses's *History*.

It was a grand conception. Not surprisingly, it formed the basis of all later Armenian writing on the ancient past. And if there were divergences between Movses and other early Armenian historians, these were later glossed over. The authority of Movses Khorenatsi was not impugned until modern times.

This is not the place to describe in detail the contents of Movses's *History* or to identify his many sources. But one of the foreign sources had a special influence on his basic design, in addition to Eusebius; that was Josephus. The *Jewish Wars* had provided Movses with much information about the Roman-Parthian wars in which Armenia had played a significant role. But Movses often calls himself an "antiquarian." It was thus Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* that provided the underlying model. Josephus had expounded the glorious traditions of a nation whose significance could not be measured by its small numbers. Likewise Movses explains his purpose: "Although we are a small country and very restricted in number, weak in power and often subject to another's rule, yet many manly deeds have been performed in our land worthy of being recorded in writing" (book 1, ch. 3).

If the works of these Armenian historians have been described at length, it is because they are important for two main reasons. In the first place, they are our prime source for the history of early Armenia. Foreign sources refer to the politics of that country when, in times of war or

international crisis, Armenian affairs impinged on other nations. But for the internal social, political, religious, and intellectual life of the country, we have little information save from Armenian sources.

These histories also tell us a good deal about their authors—not personal details of their lives, but rather the general outlook and preconceptions of their class. We must remember that Armenian writers belonged to a small group, the educated clergy and a very few laymen with comparable backgrounds, whose interests were often at variance with the culture of their patrons and whose Christian philosophy was opposed to the lingering pre-Christian traditions of the mass of the people. Steeped in Greek and Syriac learning, they brought their own interpretations to bear on the history of their land. And if pagan or Iranian motifs appear in the earliest texts, their significance was often unknown to later generations. Indeed, not until our own times have the complexity of early Armenian culture and the persistence of traditions with deep roots in Armenia's Iranian background been fully brought to light.

Rhetoric and Philosophy

The conscious activity of early Armenian writers and scholars was devoted to the assimilation of Christian and classical learning and their adaptation to specifically Armenian needs. It should be remembered that Armenians knew of classical culture through the schools and universities of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. They did not translate into Armenian many of the old literary classics such as Homer, the Greek tragedians and poets, Herodotus, Thucydides, or the orators—though they were interested in the philosophers Plato and Aristotle and their later commentators. It was rather the works of later antiquity that Armenians read and studied, works that drew on a thousand-year tradition but were themselves often somewhat unoriginal schoolbooks. To this category belongs, for example, the standard text on grammar, Dionysius Thrax's *Ars Grammatica*. This was not merely translated; the terminology and examples were adapted to fit the characteristics of the Armenian language. The study of grammar remained of importance in Armenian scholarship; commentaries on Dionysius were written in later centuries, and there was a spate of original works in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Greek works on rhetoric were also influential in Armenia. Theon's manual, the *Progymnasmata*, was translated; while the influence of

Aphthonius is discernable in the earliest original Armenian composition of this kind, the *Girk Pitoyits*, Book of Chreiai, a technical term for maxims. This was falsely ascribed to Movses Khorenatsi, no doubt because of the latter's reputation for learning as a *kertogh*, grammarian, or poet. The great interest of this long treatise, of uncertain date, is that Christian examples are introduced alongside the examples from pagan mythology that were standard in the Greek models.

Grammar and rhetoric led to the study of logic. Here the translations of commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories* and *Analytics* formed a basis for later original Armenian commentaries. Porphyry's *Eisagoge*, Introduction [to Philosophy], was translated. But more significant for the development of a native Armenian philosophical tradition was the *Prolegomena*, Introduction, by David, a pupil of Olympiodorus's in Alexandria in the sixth century. This work, known in Armenian as *Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy*, was a basic textbook, an introduction to more elaborate commentaries on individual books of Aristotle or Plato. It set out the basic purposes of philosophical inquiry and expressed in succinct form the views of earlier thinkers. This type of work was also influential in the transmission of Greek learning to the Muslims.

The Armenian version of David's *Definitions* is interesting in that passages were adapted for an Armenian readership; it is also important in that it remained a standard textbook for Armenians as late as the seventeenth century, and because many commentaries were written on it. But most significant of all, the nebulous figure of David was developed into a member of the Armenian establishment; he became an actual pupil of Mashtots. There is nothing at all implausible in an Armenian studying and teaching in Alexandria. Many Armenians played important roles in the Greco-Roman world, as they later did in the Byzantine world, and some became professors of philosophy—Prohaeresius in Athens, for example, in the fourth century. What is to be rejected is not the possibility of David being of Armenian extraction, but his being a member of the circle of students around Sahak and Mashtots. This tradition, first attested only after A.D. 1000, was part of an effort to push many influential Armenian writers and scholars back in time to the "golden age." Elaborate tales were invented describing the careers of David, now called the "Invincible" philosopher, Movses Khorenatsi, Eghishe, and others less well known. By an understandable, if unhistorical, enthusiasm—and in recognition of their significance as founders of a specifically Armenian culture—these men came to be regarded as

disciples of Mashtots in the flesh, rather than as formative figures of later generations who brought his work to full fruition.

There is one feature of these translations of technical works that deserves further attention. They are written in a style quite different from the elegant lucidity of earlier translations. They evince a striving for literalness at the expense of normal Armenian usage. The word order of the originals is strictly observed, and a new technical vocabulary developed. The remarkable feature of this vocabulary is that Greek terms were broken into their respective parts, the parts translated, and these then reassembled to make new Armenian words. They were direct "calques." The style, since it is patterned on Greek, is known as Hellenizing, and texts written in that style are ascribed to the Hellenizing, or Hellenistic, school. But the term "school" does not mean that they were produced in one place or by followers of a particular master.

The reasons for the development of such a literal style of translation are not clear. A similar, though not identical, tendency can also be seen in Syriac translations from Greek, which also became more literal with the passage of time. The main consideration seems to have been the desire for strict accuracy in the rendering of technical terms, both those of secular learning and of theology. Armenians soon became embroiled in the great controversies of the Christian world and had to defend their viewpoint when attacked, especially after their rejection of the definitions of the Council of Chalcedon. (This met in 451, but the Armenian split from communion with the Greek imperial church was not complete until over a century later.) But why the search for exact renderings of technical terms led to such slavish copying of Greek syntax is obscure. These translations are often classified according to the degree of literalness they exhibit. But the Hellenizing tendency did not follow a strict chronological development. Therefore the most literal are not necessarily the latest, or vice versa.

Technical Subjects: Anania of Shirak (Anania Shirakatsi)

The question of Armenians studying abroad, and the development of secular studies such as grammar and logic, bring us to a unique figure in early Armenian scholarship and to an unusual document. Anania of Shirak, who lived in the seventh century, is the first Armenian to have devoted his attention primarily to mathematics and scientific subjects.

His books on mathematics were used as Armenian textbooks, while his ability in astronomy led to his being asked by Catholicos Anastas (662-667) to establish a fixed calendar. This was not in the end adopted; the old Armenian year moved back one day for every four years of the Julian calendar. Anania also wrote a *Chronicle*—the first of an increasingly popular genre in which significant events were listed in order under the year of their occurrence—and composed some theological works. These last are primarily concerned with Christian festivals, reflecting his interest in dates and the calendar, which in turn hinged on astronomy. Anania was a rarity in early Armenia, a lay scholar. But the great works of patristic writers were as familiar to him as to the clerical authors of his time. The *Hexaemeron* by Basil of Caesarea, for example, was a significant source for his work *On Clouds*.

In recent times, however, Anania has attracted attention because he left a few pages of autobiography (Anania Širakac'i, 1964). This is a rare personal statement, even if somewhat self-congratulatory like Ghazar's *Letter*. According to the *Autobiography*, Anania could find no teacher of mathematics in Armenia, so he made his way toward Constantinople. But he heard of a teacher in Trebizond, Tychikos, with whom he then studied for eight years before returning to Armenia. Anania complains of the lack of interest in mathematics shown by his compatriots. His own travels are unusual only in that the object of his search was a teacher of scientific subjects. Armenians in the past had gone as far as the Byzantine capital in search of theological texts; and that pattern was to be followed in future centuries.

Even more interesting are the details given by Anania concerning the career of Tychikos. The latter had been born in Trebizond and had served in the Roman army in Armenia, where he had learned Armenian. On leaving the army he had traveled for study to Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople. This "grand tour" has parallels in the claim of Movses Khorenatsi to have studied in Alexandria, Rome, Athens, and Constantinople; and later historians credit the eighth century Stephen of Siunik with visits to Rome and Athens as well as Constantinople. That Armenians, who traveled all over the eastern Mediterranean, may have visited Italy is not unlikely. But there was no clearly demonstrable direct influence of Latin traditions on early Armenian literary culture.

Anania cannot be left without reference to another text, unique in early Armenian literature, which some modern scholars have attributed to him. This is the *Ashkharhatsuyts*, Geography (Ananias of Širak, 1992), which earlier Armenian tradition ascribed to Movses Khorenatsi but is

now often ascribed to Anania. No other geographical treatise in Armenian is known before the thirteenth century. The author of this work based himself on earlier Greek sources, notably Pappus of Alexandria, whose original Geography has been lost. But to that general framework he added a very detailed description of Armenia, the Caucasus, and Iran, not found in Greek sources but based on contemporary information. Its importance as a historical document of the early seventh century is immense. But from the point of view of literary culture, it has a different kind of significance. The emphasis in this Geography is given to the political divisions of Armenia, the provinces and their subdivisions, rather than to the geology or natural geographical features of the land and its flora and fauna. It is a product of a social milieu based on landholding and bears witness to the interests of the great noble houses to which the historians had given expression in different terms.

Homilies

Not all Armenian writers were concerned with the grand themes of history or the scholarly activity that developed from the secular interests of late antiquity. The Christian message had taken root in Armenia long since; the church had developed its hierarchical organization and ritual practices. But the mass of the people were never so securely converted that vigilance could be suspended, while the development of an individual Armenian Church had brought conflict with other branches of Christendom.

Internally there had always been dissidents. Koriun refers to Borborites, Eznik to Marcionites. Later on the Paulicians and Tondrakians attracted the ire of ecclesiastical leaders. So it is hardly surprising that the genre of homilies is well represented in Armenian literature. Several collections are extant, the earliest anachronistically attributed to St. Gregory the Illuminator. This collection, the *Hachakhapatum*, deals with the nature of the Christian faith in its practical application: the requirements of a holy life, the consequence of sin, the importance of repentance. Although there is some discussion of dogmatic matters—the Trinity and the Incarnation—the *Hachakhapatum* is not a systematic treatise in any way comparable to the *Teaching of Saint Gregory* in the *History of Agathangelos*.

To Catholicos Hovhannes Mandakuni (John Mandakuni) are attributed thirty homilies dealing with repentance, prayer, and sin. These are

more elaborate than the *Hachak haptatum*. They stress the contrast between rich and poor, and the iniquity of usury. Their author refers particularly to sins such as envy, revenge, or drunkenness, to sexual perversions, magical practices, and excessive mourning for the dead. This last is a common theme in Armenian writers from Pavstos on, echoed in numerous conciliar decisions; it was a feature of pagan practice that lingered long. But although these homilies by Mandakuni (or by the later John Mayragometsi, according to some critics) deal with concrete situations, they also contain many themes that had become literary *topoi*. The warnings against Jews and Gentiles, the evils of usury, the moral dangers of theatrical performances, known in earlier pagan Armenia but not attested in Christian times, are themes introduced into Armenian written texts from patristic homilies rather than the spontaneous expression of dangers to fifth-century Armenian congregations. Important as such texts are as evidence for social conditions, traditional themes tended to be repeated beyond the times to which they were originally applicable.

These and similar works were designed for internal consumption, in the sense of strengthening Christian life among Armenians. Also aimed at Armenians were the attacks on Paulicians and other groups who rejected the authority of the established order. The most elaborate of these were composed in the eighth century by Catholicos John of Odzun. Earlier refutations of heretics are numerous, but they generally associate errors inside Armenia with heretics abroad. Such documents attest to the need of Armenian clerics to expound the Armenian doctrinal position and to defend it against Greek or Syrian church authorities.

Theological and Polemical Writings

The development of theological controversies in the church at large is not our concern; and the evolution of an autonomous Armenian Church, which no longer accepted communion with the Greek imperial church of Byzantium or the officially recognized church in Sasanian Iran, is treated elsewhere. Here we should merely draw attention to the offshoot of those events in so far as they called forth new genres of literary activity.

The many letters preserved in historians or in the collection known as the *Book of Letters* (an official compilation of documents from the fifth to the twelfth centuries) give a vivid picture of the debates between Armenians, Greeks, Syrians, and Georgians (Tallon, 1955). But they

hardly qualify as "literature." The first treatise devoted to a technical dogmatic question is the work attributed to Catholicos John Mandakuni entitled: "Demonstration that one must say that the Lord is One Nature from two natures" (Tallon, 1955). Unlike many later works that hammer away at the errors of the Council of Chalcedon and the "heretical" views there expounded, this treatise does not identify John's opponents by name or attack them with opprobrious epithets. From a scholarly point of view, it is important as the first example of the adaptation of vocabulary associated with the Hellenizing school of translators to an original work.

In the area of theological dispute, translations continued to serve as models for Armenian writers. Of particular interest is the *Refutation of the Council of Chalcedon* by Timothy Aelurus, patriarch of Alexandria from 457 to 477. The Greek original is lost; so, as with works of numerous other patristic authors or by Philo, the Armenian version is a valuable historical source. Furthermore, the format of this work was influential in the development of a genre of writing with a long history in Armenia. Timothy had set out his arguments as a series of refutations, in which each section is primarily composed of extracts from earlier theologians. It is a "florilegium," a collection of "proof texts" from writers whose authority was respected by all sides. This *Refutation* was probably translated in connection with the second council of Dvin in 555, after which the break with the Greek church became irrevocable. It became an important weapon in the Armenian theological arsenal, frequently quoted in later centuries.

In the early seventh century the first original Armenian compilation of this kind was put together—the *Seal of Faith*, traditionally ascribed to the catholicos Komitas (615-628), but in its present form perhaps of a somewhat later date. It contained passages from Armenian, Greek, and Syrian authors that bolstered the Armenian doctrinal position. In later centuries other similar collections were compiled dealing with various matters of dispute; and in the historians long defenses of the Armenian position became common. Whether in the format of a speech or letter, their basic form was a connected string of quotations from acceptable authorities.

Less polemical in intent were commentaries on the Bible. From the earliest period commentaries by the great theologians, such as John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ephrem the Syrian, had circulated in Armenian versions. From such works, and many others, Armenians made commentaries in the form of extracts from different authors on the same verses of the biblical books. Original

Armenian commentaries begin with Stephen of Siunik in the early eighth century.

The predominant influence of ecclesiastical concerns on early Armenian writing and scholarship is clearly evident at that period. In 701 Salomon, then steward and later abbot of the monastery of Makenots in Siunik, composed the first calendar of feasts for martyrs (*tonakan*). A much more grandiose compilation was that of Armenian canon law made by Catholicos John of Odzun (717-728). It included translations from Greek of the canons of early councils of the church and the original texts of Armenian councils and of collections attributed to individual prelates. It was another four hundred years before the secular laws of Armenia were codified and set in writing.

John of Odzun was one of the great administrative patriarchs. His attacks on Paulicians were noted earlier. He was also responsible for summoning two important councils. One at Dvin in 717 was directed primarily at internal problems. A second at Manazkert in 726 was aimed at a reconciliation of differences between the Armenian and Syrian churches. Representatives from the Syrian Jacobite Church attended, and agreement was reached in a decision to establish a joint monastery on the border between the two lands where both languages would be taught and translations made. But this agreement broke down, and harmony between the two churches was never fully established. An important consideration in this regard was the divergence of ritual practices between the two groups. Although surviving documents emphasize doctrinal differences between the various branches of eastern Christendom, occasional telling remarks point to the significance of divergent ritual as the visible symbol of incompatibility.

Noteworthy in this regard is a short document of the early eighth century that describes the process whereby the Armenian Church became independent of the Greek Church, the so-called *Narratio de Rebus Armeniae*, which has survived in a Greek translation but not in the original Armenian. The text is significant in that it was written from the pro-Chalcedonian point of view—an indication that not all Armenians supported the doctrinal position of the Armenian patriarchs. The *Narratio* describes the schisms caused in Armenia when at different times the Byzantine government was able to impose a forced union; some Armenians would accept, others would reject it. In 591 Catholicos Movses II (574-604) refused to cross the border between Iranian and Byzantine territory when summoned to Constantinople. According to the *Narratio*, he declared: "I shall not cross the Azat; I shall not eat

oven-baked bread; I shall not drink hot water." The Azat was the river marking the border, but its meaning in Armenian ("free") is here used as a pun. Baked and leavened bread and the mixing of warm water with the wine were characteristics of Greek usage in the liturgy to which Armenians objected.

The codification of canon law, the compilation of liturgical books of ritual, and the writing of texts like the *Narratio* (and, according to some critics, the composition of the *History* of Movses Khorenatsi) indicate that in the eighth century Armenians were conscious of a long and specifically Armenian tradition behind them. The break with the Greek imperial church was over a century old, and the Armenian Church had now developed as a distinctly separate branch of Christendom with its own literary and religious traditions. On the other hand, the Armenians were not cutting themselves off from what they had always regarded as the prime source of learning—Constantinople. In the second decade of the eighth century Stephen, later bishop of the province of Siunik, spent several years in the capital translating works not yet available in Armenian. The most important of his translations was that of the corpus of writings ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite. These mystical works, with a strong Neoplatonic tint, had had a profound impact on Christian thought in the East and were to have an even greater influence on the Latin West. In Armenia Stephen's rendering had a wide circulation, and commentaries were written on the corpus, beginning in the tenth century.

Historians: Seventh to Tenth Centuries

Important as such works of theology or philosophy were for Armenian scholarship, they do not reflect the broader concerns of political and social life that dominate the histories. The writing of history was the field of literary activity—at least in prose—in which the Armenians particularly excelled. And although later writers did not attain the classic status of a Eghishe or a Movses Khorenatsi, their works are significant not merely as sources for the events they describe, but as expressions of a specifically Armenian cultural ethos.

The last century of Sasanian Persian rule and the beginning of the Muslim era are described by the historian known as Sebeos. As with some other Armenian writings, notably Eznik's treatise discussed earlier, the surviving text has no heading and was identified by modern

authors. So the correctness of the ascription of this history to the author mentioned in later sources as "Sebeos" has been challenged. This problem, however, is not very significant from our present point of view. The book, mistakenly called the *History of Heraclius*, is a late seventh century work of particular importance as the main source for Armenia in a period of transition. Its author paints a vivid picture of the lot of the Armenians caught between Byzantium and Iran in the long wars that preceded the defeat of the Sasanian dynasty by the emperor Heraclius and its final collapse before the Muslims. The Armenian situation is well caught in a letter supposedly sent by the emperor Maurice to Shah Khosrov, in which he suggests that they act in concert to rid themselves of the troublesome Armenians who lay between them.

Sebeos is the first writer to draw attention to another problem that in future centuries would loom ever larger: the fate of colonies of Armenians outside the homeland. The emperor Maurice had deliberately moved Armenian soldiers, with their families, away from Armenia to other regions of the empire. In part it was an attempt to weaken resistance to Byzantine control over western Armenia, in part an attempt to buttress the empire's defenses with proven troops. To the east a similar policy had been long standing. Armenians had always been obliged to provide military service in the campaigns of the shahs; this is clearly described by Eghishe and Ghazar. Usually the soldiers had returned home after their spell of duty. But Sebeos describes a colony of Armenians in Hyrcania, to the southeast of the Caspian Sea, who had been so long guarding that distant border that they had forgotten their language and were deprived of the services of a priest. The Armenian noble Smbat Bagratuni was then serving the shah as governor of that region. He remedied the situation by having a priest sent, who would not only strengthen their religious faith but also teach the soldiers their native tongue. One of Sebeos's themes was the unsuccessful efforts of Byzantine emperors to impose forced union on the Armenian Church. The role of that church and of the native tongue as instruments of national individuality thus comes out very clearly in this episode.

Sebeos was describing a time of difficulty. The even more oppressive days of Muslim domination are depicted by Ghevond (Levond) at the end of the eighth century. Important as his work is for military and political events, it is narrower in scope than that of Sebeos and cannot be counted as one of the major literary achievements of Armenian historiography. By the late ninth century the immediate danger of physical annihilation had passed. For 150 years, until the final collapse

of Armenia and the ensuing Turkish domination of eastern Anatolia, there was renewed prosperity; and the development of economic life brought many visible changes—notably the growth of cities. Yet these economic changes did not greatly alter the structure of Armenian society. Two works written at the beginning of the tenth century are typical of Armenian historiography and informative about social concerns: the *History* of Catholicos Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi (John of Draskhanakert) describes the growth of Bagratid power in northern Armenia, which was always economically more significant than the south; while Tovma (Thomas) Artsruni traces the fortunes of the Artsruni house in the area of Lake Van.

Following the tradition set by Movses Khorenatsi, John begins his *History* with a recapitulation of Armenian history from its origins, integrating Armenian tradition into the biblical account of Noah's descendants. As he comes closer to his own time, his narrative becomes more detailed. Movses had ended in the fifth century, so John used Sebeos for the ensuing two hundred years. In the more recent period the now-lost *History* by Shapuh Bagratuni served as the major source for the rise of the Bagratid family. But the main part of John's work is devoted to the thirty years (890-920) of which he had personal knowledge. As Catholicos of Armenia, John naturally played a prominent role in the politics of his time. His *History* is thus unique as a personal document, for no other Armenian historian was so involved in national and international affairs. The reader gains a rare glimpse of an Armenian who had firsthand experience of the problems he describes. Not the least of these problems was the pacification of the endemic rivalry and feuding of the noble families. The social instability—in the sense of turbulence among the barons, not revolutionary dangers from below—that so marks the pages of Pavstos Buzand was still the main disruptive force in Armenian life.

The ebb and flow of personal and dynastic rivalry comes out equally clearly in the *History of the Artsruni House* by Thomas, written at the beginning of the tenth century. This work is perhaps best known for the elaborate description of Gagik's palace and church on the island of Aghtamar. But that section forms part of a later addition; Thomas's own *History* ends before Gagik became king. Like John, Thomas begins his story with the origins of the Armenian nation, but he places his emphasis on the role of the Artsruni house. They were of old stock, claiming descent from the sons of the Assyrian king Sennacherib: as is related in II Kings, chapter 19, his sons killed their father and escaped

to the land of Armenia. By the end of the ninth century the Artsrunis had attained a prominence second only to that of the Bagratid dynasty. Thomas's *History* is an elaborate attempt to rewrite the past, as known primarily from Movses Khorenatsi, Eghishe, and Sebeos, in order to show that his patron's ancestors had enjoyed as glorious an antiquity as their rivals. The details are not as important as the general attitude: the emphasis on genealogy, on the great deeds of the past—real or imagined—as giving justification for present claims, on heroic exploits in war and valiant resistance, even to martyrdom for the faith. Such were the virtues of the noble class whose interests Thomas and other Armenian historians defended.

Over half of Thomas's *History* deals with the events of fifty years: from the murderous invasion of the caliph's general Bugha, which began in 851, to the lifting of direct Muslim control, the establishment of a Bagratid kingdom in the north, and the prosperity of Artsruni lands under Gagik. This part is interesting on several counts. It is our main source, even if tendentious, for events in southern Armenia, written by a contemporary. As an interpretation of Muslim domination, it reflects the influence of Eghishe; Thomas depicts the caliphs and their minions in terms deliberately evocative of Eghishe's description of Shah Yazdagerd II and his attempt to crush Armenian liberties. And by extensive use of letters and speeches, Thomas portrays in vivid fashion the underlying social attitudes of the Armenian nobility. Eghishe's speeches had dealt with themes of perennial significance: cultural survival, the role of the church, the preservation of traditional values. Thomas's speeches deal with more specific issues: a noble's social responsibilities in caring for his land and punishing rebels, the ways of attaining that goal—largesse and liberal entertainments—the delights of hunting, and all the trappings of a nobleman's life in the country. Thomas's *History* did not have the relevance for later generations enjoyed by Eghishe's *Vardan and the Armenian War*. Yet as a social document it gives us a clearer insight into the personal concerns of the nobility of the time.

Thomas's *History* had little influence on later writers because the Bagratid house dominated the political scene, and it was their spokesman, Movses Khorenatsi, who fixed the standard version of early Armenian history. Thomas's rewriting of Armenian origins did not gain acceptance, while his picture of ninth-century Vaspurakan was too provincial to attract much attention. It is perhaps no accident that the only surviving complete text of the *History of the Artsruni House* was

copied on the island of Aghtamar (in 1309). On the other hand, in more popular, less formal writings the exploits of the Artsruni heroes lived on. Reference was made earlier to the lost *History* by Shapuh Bagratuni. Ironically, a text discovered and published, wrongly, under his name in the twentieth century deals not with the Bagratid dynasty but with the Artsruni princes who appear in the pages of Thomas. The more recent editor of the full text wisely removed the ascription of this curious medley of popular tales from “Pseudo-Shapuh” to an “Anonymous Storyteller” (Thomson, 1988-1989).

Several other historical works deal with regions peripheral to the centers of political and economic life. West of Lake Van is the province of Taron, where St. Gregory the Illuminator had established the first church in Ashtishat. This province produced several historians, some with dubious credentials. Zenob, supposedly a Syrian and colleague of St. Gregory, describes the activities of the Illuminator and King Trdat; John, bishop of the Mamikonian, chronicles the exploits of nobles of that family at the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries. Both works are later compositions, of the tenth or eleventh century, designed to bring greater prestige to the area of Taron. (The most important historian from Taron, Stephen, known as “Asoghik,” will be discussed later.)

On the opposite side of Armenia, across the Kura River, lay the country of Caucasian Albania. The Aghvank were not Armenian and spoke their own Caucasian tongue. Koriun claims that Mashtots invented a script for them; and indeed an alphabet and a few inscriptions have been discovered. But for literary purposes the Aghvank wrote in Armenian. Their history was set down by Movses Daskhurantsi (Moses of Daskhuran), of whose life nothing is known. His *History of the Aghvank* was probably composed in the second half of the tenth century, though there are a few later additions. This too is a tendentious work; it attempts to prove the independence and antiquity of the local Albanian Church. But it has great significance as a rare witness in Armenian to the history of a non-Armenian people. Although Armenians on occasion wrote about foreign nations, such as the Mongols, and adapted the chronicles of the Syrian patriarch Michael and of the Georgians, only the Aghvank adopted Armenian as their vehicle of literary expression.

The focus on ecclesiastical affairs, so important to Movses Daskhurantsi, is apparent in many Armenian authors—which is hardly surprising, given the predominant role of the church from the beginnings of Armenian literacy. So questions of doctrine, of governance, of opposition to heretics, all find their place in works generally regarded

as "historical." Resistance to Greek attempts at enforced union figures prominently in the seventh and eighth centuries. But Armenians were not monolithic in their support of the national church. There were many who supported the doctrinal position of the imperial church of Byzantium and accepted the Council of Chalcedon. In such circles the Armenian original of the *Narratio* was composed; and against such "heretics" the later historian Ukhtanes inveighed.

Of Ukhtanes little is known. He was probably bishop of Sebaste at the end of the tenth century—a time when Armenian colonies were expanding westward beyond the Euphrates. His work has three sections: a summary of Armenian history down to Trdat, a description of the Armeno-Georgian schism at the beginning of the seventh century, and a section, now lost, on the Armenian Chalcedonians. The great interest of the middle section is that many of the documents used by Ukhtanes are also preserved in a separate collection, the *Book of Letters* mentioned earlier. Ukhtanes's *History* does not rank high as a literary composition, but it is a salutary reminder that Armenians were not unanimous in supporting their national church.

Religious Poetry: Gregory of Narek

The emphasis placed thus far on the role of the clergy—on bishops who played their part in worldly affairs, or scholarly monks writing in their monasteries, translating and commenting on learned treatises—should not obscure another aspect of literary activity. Armenia has produced many fine poets. At first such talents found their expression in religious hymns and prayers. By medieval times secular themes are introduced, though seemingly profane verse may disguise a mystical fervor in which the beloved is not of this world. Here we should turn to the greatest religious poet in Armenian history, the best loved of all Armenian literary figures in later ages, Grigor Narekatsi (Gregory of Narek).

Gregory was born in the middle of the tenth century and died probably in 1010. He spent all his life from childhood in the monastery of Narek, by the southern shore of Lake Van. Narek was an important center of learning, and Gregory's father, Khosrov, had been noted for his knowledge of Greek. An edifying story in the *Haysmavurk* (the *Synaxarion*, or collection of saints' lives arranged by days of the liturgical year) indicates that Gregory too was suspected of being a *tzayt*, a pro-Greek Chalcedonian. Messengers came to summon him to

a tribunal where the charge was to be examined. Before setting out Gregory offered them a meal: roast pigeons. But it was a Friday, and the messengers were scandalized. Gregory excused his ignorance and said to the pigeons: "Fly away to your fellows because today is a fast-day." The roast pigeons came back to life and flew away. Thus were his critics silenced.

Gregory's reputation, however, depends on the more solid basis of a large number of hymns for feast days, panegyrics on holy figures, and most especially a collection of mystical prayers known as the *Book of Lamentations*. So famous did this become that it is commonly known simply as "Narek." The *Book of Lamentations* contains ninety-five poems, each of which is entitled "Conversation with God from the depths of the heart." These prayers deal with separation and reunion with God, dwelling in particular on the mystic's anguish at the separation caused by sin and his yearning for union. The language is often obscure, but vivid and innovative. Not least interesting is Gregory's use of rhythmical rhyming cadences, reminiscent of Arabic prosody, the *sadj*. The influence of Arabic, especially in southern Armenia in the tenth century or later, is hardly surprising given the political and economic ties between Armenia and the Muslim world. The large number of Arabic names in use among the Armenian nobility is but a small token of the social impact of Islam.

The Eleventh Century

Gregory of Narek, at the end of his *Book of Lamentations*, celebrated the advance of the "victorious and great emperor of the Romans, Basil," into northwestern Armenia in A.D. 1000. This eastward expansion of the Byzantine Empire had begun in the previous century. By 1045 Armenia had been incorporated into the empire, only to lose to the Seljuks within another generation what security had been temporarily gained. The demise of the independent Bagratid and Artsruni kingdoms and the establishment of large Armenian colonies to the west of the Euphrates River brought Armenians into much closer contact with Greek ecclesiastical and administrative authorities than had been the case for several hundred years. But Armenian solidarity was not totally compromised. The establishment of Armenian bishoprics outside the old homeland at the end of the tenth century, and the exile of the patriarch to Cappadocia after 1045, gave a focus for national feeling that survived until the

development of a new, smaller Armenian state in Cilicia at the time of the Crusades.

Gregory (Grigor) Magistros

Armenian authors of the eleventh century are surprisingly ambiguous in their attitude to these momentous changes. For some it was an opportunity to imbibe more deeply of the Greek learning that for a thousand years had attracted Armenians. Gregory Pahlavuni, known as Magistros from his title in the Byzantine administration, illustrates the most extreme limit of philhellenism; his son Vahram, who took the name of Gregory as catholicos and earned the nickname of *Vkayaser*, "lover of martyrs," was more typical in that his attention was devoted to Christian rather than pagan learning. But others, notably the historian Aristakes of Lastivert (Aristakes Lastiverttsi), were full of pessimism and lamentation. It was the Armenians' sinfulness, supposed Aristakes, that had brought such misfortunes upon their heads. The later Matthew of Edessa stresses the terror and sense of helplessness that the sudden appearance of the Turks caused in Armenia.

Over the centuries many Armenians had taken service in the Byzantine government or army. Many had risen to positions of eminence, and some had attained the imperial throne after a generation or two of acculturation. Such Armenians were integrated into the ethnically diverse population of the empire; they accepted the authority of the Greek Church, and were more or less lost to Armenia in the sense that their future careers had little direct influence on the cultural life of their native land. Gregory Magistros is thus unusual; although he was a familiar figure in Constantinople and served as duke of southwestern Armenia for the imperial government after 1048, his literary activity was pursued in Armenian. His interests were wide: He translated works of Plato and Euclid, wrote a commentary on the *Grammar* of Dionysius Thrax (which had been translated in the Hellenizing style, as noted earlier), wrote poetry, and composed a series of letters on scholarly and administrative matters. These last are quite unique in Armenian, being not only personal letters, as opposed to official documents such as those preserved in the *Book of Letters*, but also original in style. Gregory was deeply imbued with the contemporary Greek enthusiasm for classical learning. His letters abound in recondite allusions to the literature of pagan antiquity; and their tortuous language, rich in neologisms, reflects the rhetorical obscurity of Byzantine style. Important as they are as a

historical source, written by a man who played a major role in the politics and scholarship of his day, they are so daunting that no modern translator has yet tackled the whole collection.

Gregory's activity was not confined to scholarship of a recondite kind. He was noted for poems on religious topics, of which the most famous is a work of 1,000 lines summarizing the contents of the Bible for the benefit of a Muslim. During his period of service for the Byzantine Empire, he energetically opposed the Tondrakian sect in Armenia. Yet Gregory Magistros's literary work lies outside the mainstream of Armenian cultural activity. Later generations did not follow his enthusiasm for Byzantine patterns. Nonetheless, he remains a remarkable figure who illustrates, albeit in a rather extreme fashion, one of the courses open to Armenians at a time of political and cultural change.

Gregory Vkadzor

Gregory Magistros's son, Vahram, was more typical of Armenian scholarship in that he devoted himself to theological concerns. For forty years (from 1065 until his death in 1105) he held the patriarchal throne as Grigor (Gregory) II. But he did not inherit his father's administrative interests. Leaving all official duties to others, he directed his energy to seeking out and having translated hagiographical texts not yet available in Armenian. In that search he traveled widely in the Near East, from Constantinople to Egypt and Jerusalem.

Those forty years were a period of transformation in Armenian life: A new home was being forged in Cilicia, and contact with the Crusaders introduced the Armenians directly to the culture of Western Christendom. Grigor Vkadzor's activity draws attention to the scattering of Armenian communities, already well under way before his time. His concern for Greek literature was nothing new. For more than six centuries Armenians had been ever anxious to make available in their own language religious and other texts written in Greek, despite the strained relationship between the two churches. However, this translation activity was not directed to the rendering of contemporary Byzantine authors, but rather of earlier patristic writers, the common heritage of all Christendom.

Although the eleventh century marks a turning point in Armenia's political fortunes, there was no sudden break in traditional literary activity. The mass of Armenians continued to live in Armenia; indeed, the economic prosperity of Armenian cities was probably greater after the loss

of political autonomy than before. New artistic ideas were introduced in the realm of miniature painting by Armenians established in Asia Minor. But although the transformations under way in Armenian life are echoed by the historians, their works are not dramatically different from those of their predecessors. Armenian scholarship did not follow the path of Gregory Magistros. In fact, the newer trends, such as interest in medicine or the development of lyrical poetry, ambiguously religious and erotic, owe more to the influence of Arabic and Persian than to Greek.

Asoghik

The two significant historians of the eleventh century, Stepanos Asoghik (Taronetsi), nicknamed *Asoghik*, "teller" of tales, and Aristakes of Lastivert, do not evince any sharp break with earlier traditions of historiography, although their works are quite different from each other in approach. Stephen begins with a brief résumé of the early history of the world based on earlier authors: the Bible, Eusebius of Caesarea, and for Armenia, Movses Khorenatsi. He lists the various Armenian historians and repeats some of the tales that had arisen concerning obscure figures such as Movses Khorenatsi. Such traditions as those attested to by Thomas Artsruni and Stephen were not all accepted in later times. But the desire to associate great figures of the past with Mashtots himself was strong. Stephen was the first to include David the "Invincible" philosopher in that circle, and later Eghishe swelled their ranks.

The second half (Book III) of Stephen's work deals with the history of the hundred or so years before his own time. He discusses events outside Armenia as well as local history—hence the title of his book, "World History." But there is no coherent thread, for the narrative reads as a series of disconnected episodes. A new feature is his division of material into three sections. Each chapter gives first a summary of the major political events, then commentary on the religious history of the time, and finally information about literary and scholarly figures. Although this schematic approach has parallels in some later chronicles—the Syrian patriarch Michael, for example, actually divided his pages into three separate columns—it did not set a precedent for Armenian historians.

Aristakes of Lastivert

The *History* of Aristakes is quite different. It deals with only two generations, from 1000 to 1071, rather than with the entire span of the

history of the world; and it is a very personal document, expressing at length the author's sentiments at the disasters that befell Armenia. So although it has greater coherence than Stephen's work as a progressive exposition, the narrative is frequently interrupted for lamentations and disquisitions on Armenian sinfulness, which brought upon them the various misfortunes. Laments were not uncommon features of Armenian historical works; but they had previously been confined to set pieces at appropriate occasions. And poetic laments (*voghbs*) were a significant feature of later Armenian literature. But Aristakes's *History* is unique in its integration of narrative and lachrymose comment.

Schools and Scholarship

Although some Armenian historians were well-known persons of their time, most of the famous early authors remain vague figures. We know little or nothing about their background and upbringing, save that the great majority were churchmen or monks. Our ignorance of their formal education obscures the importance of the monastic schools. What hints about courses of study do survive, as for example in the letters of Gregory Magistros, are more pertinent to advanced learning. Nonetheless, some general characteristics of Armenian learning and scholarship, and hence of formal literary activity, do emerge from the role of the *vardapet* in Armenia.

The position of *vardapet*, "master of instruction," a celibate cleric, was a unique office in Eastern Christendom, with no exact parallel in Greek or Syrian tradition. The closest parallel for the early period is the role of the *herbads* in Zoroastrianism. These were priest-teachers whose function was to teach orally. Their role as missionaries in the greater Iranian Empire is reminiscent of the itinerant nature of the first Armenian *vardapets*. The most outstanding example of the latter is Mashtots with his circle of students.

As time went on, the need for such missionary activity in Armenia diminished. The *vardapets* became settled in monasteries, even if they moved from one to another, and they acquired a specific status in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the later compilations of canon law their duties are clearly spelled out. But the most important result of the development of this office was the continuing hold of the church over education and learning. There were no secular schools in early or

medieval Armenia. The wealthy may have had private tutors, and in the fourth and fifth centuries a few, (again wealthy), Armenians studied in the secular schools of the Greek world. But the autobiography of Anania of Shirak makes it clear that after Armenia had become firmly Christian, there were very few laymen teaching secular subjects in Armenia. For those who progressed beyond the elementary level, the Bible and various theological texts provided the basic educational diet. Grammar and rhetoric, logic and philosophy were not neglected; here the basic texts translated in the Hellenizing style were put to good purpose. But even technical subjects were pursued with a view to their ecclesiastical use. In this regard the career of John the Deacon (Hovhannes Sorkavag or Imastaser) or Philosopher, who died in 1129, may serve as a fitting conclusion to this sketch of Armenian literary culture.

Brought up in the monastery of Haghpat in northeastern Armenia, John first devoted himself to the study of music. As he grew older he studied "at the feet of *vardapets*." But his biographer places more emphasis on John's spiritual development and ascetic virtues than on details of the texts and authors he studied. However, these did include historical writings, commentaries, and biblical texts. He later moved to Ani, where he began to teach grammar, "the key of knowledge." Medieval Armenians regarded grammar as more than the study of a shifting language; it offered insights into eternal verities. John also pursued mathematics and became familiar with works of Aristotle and Plato. Among his works are a chronicle, poems, and theological writings. But his scholarly fame depends on his interest in astronomy. This he put to practical use by composing a perpetual calendar as well as several tables dealing with phases of the moon and similar topics. In this regard his only predecessor was Anania of Shirak; but the latter held no official position in the church.

The difference in emphasis between the scholarly activity of John the Philosopher and the concerns of his biographer raises an interesting question. To what extent did the populace at large appreciate the written classics of Armenian literature? Were they indeed even aware of the existence of most of them? John's biographer probably had a sound sense of his contemporaries' interests. His emphasis lies on John as a holy man, noted for his ascetic achievements and his ability to work miracles. These were more tangible measures of fame than scholarly treatises. He had in mind the edification of the Armenian people, the needs of the church, and the greater glory of God.

Oral Tales and the *Sasnadzrer*

But even those who could read on the simpler level, without comprehending the profundities of John's original works, were a minority in Armenia. The mass of the people was illiterate. The old pagan epics had perhaps not been suppressed entirely, but they had been driven out of the acceptable canon. And since the medieval writers do not describe the lives and interests of the majority of their fellow countrymen, except to castigate reprehensible practices, we cannot know for sure what oral tales delighted the leisure moments of humbler folk. A vast wealth of popular stories, fables, and poems has been recorded in recent times; much of it undoubtedly goes back many centuries. But by far the most elaborate product of oral composition is the fourfold cycle of tales concerning the wild heroes of Sasun, the *Sasnadzrer*.

This oral collection was not recorded in writing until the 1870s. There are many versions in different dialects; for it was not the deliberate composition of a single individual, but was created by the stylized retelling of traditional tales by generations of bards. There is therefore no "original" text to be reconstructed from the "variants." The legendary heroes form four generations: Sanasar and Balthasar; Mher the Great; David of Sasun, after whom the whole cycle is often named; and Little Mher. Their successive exploits are narrated in rhythmic prose to form four sections of a whole. The unifying theme, around which are woven numerous extravagant adventures, is the defense of the homeland against foreigners: the caliph of Baghdad appears at the beginning, while David does battle with the king of Egypt. The basic situations thus reflect the periods of Muslim domination in the eighth to ninth centuries and again in later Mamluk times when the kingdom of Cilicia collapsed. But there are reminiscences of earlier and later periods, while the whole is a timeless tale of the exploits of heroes greater than ordinary mortals.

It is well to end with these oral tales—rather misleadingly often called an "epic"—for the written literature of early and medieval Armenia reflects the ethos of only one segment of Armenian society. Prose writing is rather formal, and *belles lettres* are hardly represented until modern times. Poetry gave an opportunity for more spontaneous expression, but was mostly confined to religious themes. Yet there was a vivacious side to Armenian life. It will not be found in learned treatises, but it does emerge in the *Sasnadzrer*, in tales such as the "Pseudo-Shapuh," and in miniature painting.

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